

CHAPTER 2

THE IDEALISTS: JAMES HARVEY ROBINSON AND THE GENETIC METHOD OF HISTORY, JOHN DEWEY AND REFLECTIVE THINKING

The genetic method of history was favored by John Dewey and popularized by James Harvey Robinson as the New History. It was a critical analysis of intellectual history, undertaken with the intention of identifying the origin of an idea within a cultural context of common needs. Baconian scientific standards were imposed on inquiry. The method prescribed clearing away all previous presuppositions which were assumed to have grown out of a specific cultural context and then testing the stripped idea set for its clarity and value in present-day circumstances. What this really boiled down to was identification of mostly psychological communal needs, past and present, and comparison of contemporary social needs with those of the earlier epoch. William James' emphasis on psychology had impressed Dewey so much that Dewey referred currents in intellectual history to human psychic needs and motives. According to Dewey, justification for beliefs is the actual foundation for all past philosophy. "It became the work of philosophy to justify on rational grounds the spirit, though not the form, of accepted beliefs and traditional customs."¹

The premise was Darwinian. As human needs changed through time, so too would the basis for "belief" in any idea set. The genetic method made it possible to undermine any system which rested on unexamined presuppositions because rational thought, in complete awareness of itself was the underlying absolute value. When completely followed out, the genetic method raised significant questions about historical "truth" and "right" beliefs and actions. Dewey got around this by denying the existence of truth in any absolute sense.

There were definite values embedded within the new history. The first was: **Do not be afraid of change.** The underlying premise is that all thought is the evolution of previous thought and therefore modern life is not a radical deviation from previous history; rather it can be understood as the potentiality which grew out of the past; "as the oak grew from the acorn," was a favorite way of saying it.

A second value was: **A new philosophy of history will inform right action.** Dewey and Robinson, as social meliorists, looked forward to the day when the methods and insights of science, especially the biological sciences,

evolution, psychology and anthropology, would be applied to philosophy and then to social reform. This would be done by disciplining the imagination and bringing the inescapable irrational factor, which controls human behavior by commandeering thought, under rational evaluation.

For the radicals of the 1920s, the modern evils attributable to the rapid advance of science, technology and industrialization, with the resulting disenchantment with the world, human alienation, devaluation of spiritual life, etc., are the nasty fruits of undisciplined imagination. As Robinson put it in *The Mind in the Making*, "Men are tormented by the opinions they have of things, rather than by the things themselves."² Undisciplined imagination is the real enemy of mankind; a creative intelligence will discipline the imagination to submit its spontaneous images in signs and symbols to the faculty of judgment, to logical examination by reason.

It is important to understand the pragmatic use of history and the value placed on history as a tool which is "instrumental" in coming into a proper relation with the present. "The past is recalled not because of itself but because of what it adds to the present."³ As instrumental truth, history is not true or false in itself, but true as a social or communal idea; its degree of truth is measured by the degree of efficacy it achieves in bringing all parts of present experience into satisfactory relations of awareness, understanding, and meaning.

According to Dewey's way of thinking neither the past nor the future exists in itself. The reality of past or future is limited to its usefulness in the present. This can only mean that the past and future are plastic in a similar way. Although it seems to go against the common-sense understanding of past and future, based upon presuppositions in the Western tradition such as linear time, causality, and free will, which taken together imply a whole set of interdependent notions, according to Dewey's way of thinking only immediate experience is real. This could be represented as a sweeping move toward the strictest sort of empiricism.

Burt was not convinced that such a view would be instructive over the long haul and he wrestled with the consequences of this limitation in qualifying reality in such a narrow way in a paper he read at the Sixth International Congress of Philosophy in Boston in 1926. In that paper he argued against the extreme position of making immediate experience the only reality we can know. He wanted to argue for some blend of experience and memory as fundamental constituents of reality. Eventually he attempted to work out a new philosophy of mind based on Darwinian evolution and learning theory.

Burt and the other Naturalists were essentially realists in the sense that they did not in any way deny objective reality as a world of phenomena presenting themselves to human perception. What they wanted to examine was

human interaction with physical reality in order to better understand humans. They were not concerned with understanding the physical world as it is in itself.

A paper, which Burt read before the Personalistic Discussion Group at the American Philosophical Association meeting in 1969, confirms that his method in *The Metaphysical Foundations* was a brand of naturalist pragmatism. He characterized it as "a systematic attempt to develop a comprehensive orientation in the form of a philosophy of man...Inclusive reality for the pragmatists is the dynamic experience of man."⁴ Thomas Kuhn's thinking comes easily to mind from subsequent remarks where Burt wants to use science as an "enlightening example of the principles central to a philosophy of man." Such a philosophy would be a concerted effort to understand how we think. Burt said:

Instead of assuming that in knowledge the human mind conforms to objects as given, a thinker should assume that in their knowable structure objects conform to the human mind."⁵

The sciences do not tell us what the world apart from man is like. They guide us in discovering what the world is like when it is approached in terms of presuppositions reflecting some human value that has come to exercise pervasive influence in this or that epoch of history. The path to understanding...is not the futile attempt to look at external reality but to look at man as he interacts with other realities.⁶

It may be that thus far only a small fraction of the patterns of order that might provide a model for scientific knowledge have been taken as a basis for man's quest to understand his world. Perhaps some of the possible models will take seriously conceptions of order that have appeared in other cultures than those sharing the heritage of Western civilization. At any rate I see no justification in the history of science for expecting that the currently dominant values with their distinctive presuppositions will remain dominant forever.⁷

The genetic method which Dewey and the other Columbia naturalists recommended placed emphasis on identifying the dominant problem being resolved by a particular intellectual tradition or idea set. After analysis of older solutions, the goal was to describe a reconstituted present on the basis of the questions that had been asked and answered in the past. Thus, the continuity of the present with the past and future was presupposed within the critical analysis of history. We can see how these ideas figured prominently in Burt's thinking from *The Metaphysical Foundations* right on through his *All-embracing Philosophy of Man*.

It is important to appreciate that Dewey and the other "radicals" of the twenties would be suspicious and critical of modern post-structuralist historiography because it is not self-critical or self-aware in the way Dewey and the others demanded. Few of the modern deconstructionists subject their

methods or themselves to reflective thinking. After all, it is one thing to acknowledge psychological elements in human behavior and quite another to make the immediate psychological elements the whole affair.

In *The Mind in the Making* (1921) James Harvey Robinson, the foremost popularizer of the new genetic history wrote:

Human thought and conduct can only be treated broadly and truly in a mood of tolerant irony. It belies the logical precision of the long faced, humorless writer on politics and ethics, whose works rarely deal with man at all, but are a stupid form of metaphysics.⁸

For a post-structuralist the metaphysical ideal is easily identified as any particular agenda being put forward by the historian, whether is it capitalism, socialism, Marxism, feminism, etc. The radicals of the twenties were violently opposed to all the "isms"; it was human understanding, without any doctrine or dogma whatever that they celebrated. The social agenda was education for the sake of free thinking, a reasoned approach to change, and thereby, freedom from the anxiety caused by change.

For pragmatist historians, the facts of history were important, just not any more important than the plastic interpretation of those facts for the present. The key to real understanding of man was that there must be an appreciation of the past in context and an appreciation of the present with the past as part of the present context. Harvey Wish, in his *Introduction* to the 1965 edition of James Harvey Robinson's *The New History* (1912) describes the original intent of new history this way.

Very important for the New History was the idea that modern history, enriched by an all-inclusive subject matter, should be taught for the purpose of understanding the great problems of the present. Military and constitutional history, as well as pure trivia, were cut down. A course in social problems was added with the Robinson proviso that teachers must seek the cooperation of the allied sciences of man--not the old political narratives.⁹

In his undergraduate course at Columbia, *The Intellectual History of Western Europe*, Robinson had stressed modern history at the expense of the ancient details. He made room for intellectual, cultural, and social history by cutting out lesser names and events. "History, in the broadest sense of the word, is all that we know about everything that man has ever done, or thought, or hoped, or felt."¹⁰ According to Harvey Wish, Robinson's purpose for history was this:

To give meaning to the present, history must be treated as an ever-continuous genetic development in which the present is illuminated by perceiving anachronisms or the often irrational origins of our ideas and institutions.¹¹

Such an approach combined well with an education in *Reflective Thinking*. Taken together they were intended to discipline the imagination and to make a new kind of intellectual history the cornerstone of a reconstructed philosophy. More than just the examination of logical idea sets from the past, in Dewey's and Robinson's program, intellectual history became a parade of human solutions to temporal problems of experience. Of course, this is exactly the line Burttt followed in his examination of early modern science. For Burttt the "logico-mathematical world-view" was just one in a passing parade of world-views, not more significant than others. At the end of *The Metaphysical Foundations*, Burttt appealed to his intelligent readers to glimpse a new world-view which could be permanent. In his later philosophy, the permanent world-view is what he came to call a philosophy of man.

It is unlikely that Burttt had any exposure to the genetic method before he came to New York from Yale and began taking classes at Columbia. As he assimilated the reformers' perspective, he applied it eagerly to his own research interest. After six years in association with Columbia Philosophy, Burttt had proved his mettle, and he was appointed a full-time instructor in 1921. Burttt joined a prestigious group of young intellectuals who were taken into the Department of Philosophy as teachers. They called themselves The Columbia Associates and were expected to design courses themselves. Simultaneously he worked on what was to become *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*.

At the time Burttt was made an instructor, the Philosophy Department was being expanded rapidly to put it on a competitive footing with Harvard and the Sage School at Cornell. Consequently, selections into the department were made with utmost consideration for the future. The other university in the running for lead position in the field was the University of Chicago, about equal with Columbia, and just behind Harvard and Cornell in prestige.¹²

John Herman Randall, Jr. was the most well liked, most respected and most powerful member of this elite group of young men at Columbia and as historian for the department, he wrote the following account.

The new members added during the expanding twenties all took an active part in the College program; there has never emerged the slightest division in the Department of Philosophy between a college and a graduate staff...The young instructors were from the start encouraged...to offer graduate courses in fields they could work up--originally historical, but later analytic or systematic as well....Woodbridge and Dewey were not averse to seeing established a band of

E.A. Burtt, Historian and Philosopher

A Study of the author of *The Metaphysical Foundations
of Modern Physical Science*

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